

## Ethnography and Organizational Processes

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### Abstract

Ethnography, we think, is well suited for process studies, as ethnographers draw close enough to observe the precariousness of organizational processes, stay long enough to see change occurring, and are contextually sensitive enough to understand the twists and turns that are part of organizational life. In presenting ethnography as a crucial method for studying organizational processes, this chapter discusses what we see as the central aspects of ethnography – fieldwork, sensework, and textwork – and their ability to elucidate such processes. The chapter illustrates how organizational ethnography – through the researcher's immersion in, and analysis of, the field setting – is able to capture the unfolding of organizational life and its dynamism in two different ways: taking 'long shots' by following developments over an extended period of time (long-term dynamics), and making 'close-ups' of the micro-dynamics of day-to-day organizational life (short-term dynamics). Finally, it reflects on how organizational ethnography itself might gain from adopting a more explicitly processual approach.

### Introduction

All is in motion but some social flows move so slowly relative to others that they seem almost as fixed and stationary as the landscape and the geographical levels under it, though these too, are, of course, forever in slow flux.

Victor Turner (1974: 44)

We say the acrobat on the high wire maintains her stability.  
However, she does so by continuously correcting her imbalances....

Tsoukas and Chia (2002: 572)

In recent decades, organizational scholars have set out to explore the processual character of organizations. They have investigated both the overtly ephemeral and sometimes dramatically unstable aspects of contemporary organizing and the social flux and flow of everyday organizing hiding beneath organizations' stable surface appearances. These studies manifest a range of different approaches and methods. In this chapter we evaluate the use and usefulness of one of these – ethnography – for studying organizational processes. As ethnographers draw close enough to observe the precariousness of such processes, stay long enough to see change occurring, and are contextually

sensitive enough to understand the twists and turns that are part of organizational life, ethnography is well suited for such study. Ethnographers are commonly aware that '...incremental shifts and repositioning are the rule, not the exception, in organizational life' (Morrill and Fine, 1997: 434). 'By virtue of its situated, unfolding, and temporal nature,' then, as Jarzabkowski et al. (2014: 282) put it, ethnography 'is revelatory of processual dynamics'.

Ethnography or, to emphasize the processual nature of doing ethnography itself, *ethnographing* (Tota, 2004; de Jong, Kamsteeg and Ybema, 2012) typically means three things: (i) doing research (fieldwork), (ii) understanding the world with an orientation toward sensemaking (sensework), and (iii) articulating and presenting those understandings (textwork). The first of these refers to research done through prolonged and intensive engagement with the research setting and its actors, combining different fieldwork methods (observing, with whatever degree of participating; talking to people, including interviewing; and/or the close reading of research-relevant documents). Second, ethnography embraces a sensibility towards meaning and meaning-making processes, and this shapes the ways its observations and interpretations are carried out. Third, ethnographic analyses are commonly presented through a written text presenting data that give voice to the minutiae of everyday life, in their social, political, and historical contexts, thereby conveying to readers a sense of 'being there'. This fieldwork, sensework, textwork trio may remind of other treatments of field research methods (e.g., fieldwork, headwork, and textwork in Van Maanen, 2011a; 2011b; fieldwork, deskwork, and textwork in Yanow, 2000), which Wilkinson (2014) supplements with preparatory legwork. We replace the middle term with 'sensework' to encompass a broader range of analytic activity that is sensitive towards organizational actors' meaning-making, the complexities of the everyday, and the tacitly known and/or concealed dimensions of organizational life. More is involved, in our view, than just the 'headwork' of theory-informed interpretation and distanced analysis.

Although previous work has typically not made a process focus explicit, the history of organizational studies shows ethnographic research being sensitive to a key feature of organizing processes unfolding over time: the intersubjective processes of 'social reality' construction. Ethnography has commonly required a prolonged period of researcher immersion in the research setting in which fieldwork is being carried out. This has inspired many influential organizational studies, both in the discipline's early days and in more recent years (Fine, Morrill and Surianarain, 2009; Ybema et al., 2009; Yanow, 2013). Earlier studies delved into the dynamics of, for instance, bureaucratic control and resistance (e.g., Selznick, 1949; Blau, 1955; Kaufman, 1960; Roy, 1960; Crozier, 1964; Kunda, 1992), organizational performances and dynamics (Goffman, 1959), and the unofficial workarounds brought into play through processes of power struggles and local meaning-making of labor relations (Dalton, 1959). Some of these studies also covered longer-term developments, such as Gouldner's follow-up account of worker-management relationships in a gypsum mine (Gouldner, 1956). Although these studies show that an ethnographic approach is well-equipped for doing process analyses, processes themselves were not often their explicit concern. More recent ethnographic studies, however, have taken a more explicit 'process turn', focusing on the instability and dynamics of organizational life on the ground (e.g., Feldman, 2000; Jay, 2013; Lok and de Rond, 2013).

We begin this chapter with a sketch of studying organizational processes which provides the conceptual footing to argue for the relevance of ethnographing for this kind of study. To bring the processual qualities of

ethnographic work into sharp focus, ethnography can be seen as 'following' actors, interactions, and artefacts over time and space. Ethnographers go along with actors, interactions, and artefacts on the move or stay in one place observing things that move around them. Next, we explain in more detail what ethnographic fieldwork, sensework, and textwork entail, and how these relate to process. We discuss two different foci in process analysis – long-term developments and micro-dynamics – and present two recent examples of ethnographic work which illustrate what ethnography can do for the study of process. We conclude with a few suggestions as to how ethnographers could become more process-sensitive in their field-, sense- and textwork. That is, although ethnography has something to contribute to process studies, ethnographers could themselves learn from taking the issues engaged in this handbook into consideration.

### **Studying processes: Verbs and nouns**

A process approach sets out to address 'questions about how and why things emerge, develop, grow, or terminate over time' (Langley et al., 2013: 1). Focusing on 'how' questions, process studies bring into view '[t]he temporal structure of social practices and the uncertainty and urgencies that are inherently involved in them' (Langley et al., 2013: 2; see also Langley, 2009). Reorganizations, innovations, and crises, in particular, are moments that show how organizational life changes. In one view, taking a process perspective entails looking at the way organizations move from one relatively stable state to another (referred to in the literature as a weak process view). A more radical process perspective (a strong process view) goes one step further. It conceptualizes organizational life as flow(ing), and organizing is 'the attempt to order the intrinsic flux of human action, to channel it towards certain ends by generalizing and institutionalizing particular cognitive representation,' finding in it 'a pattern that is constituted, shaped, and emerging from change' (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002: 567). In this view, "entities (such as organizations and structures) are no more than temporary instantiations of ongoing processes, continually in a state of becoming." Moreover, changing "is not something that happens to things, but the way in which reality is brought into being in every instant" (Langley et al., 2013: 5; see also Van de Ven and Poole, 2005).

Organization, then, 'is a verb, a process of organizing, an emergent flux' (Van de Ven and Poole, 2005: 1387), a view echoing Weick's (1979) argument: 'Without verbs, people would not see motion, change, and flow; people would only see static display and spines' (Weick, 1979: 44). Process approaches turn conventional thinking on its head, as they take off from the assumption that change is the standard, suggesting that stability is what needs to be explained, instead. Organizations and other social systems, as Schön (1971: 30) would have it, are part of 'continuing processes of transformation' within society. Seen from this angle, organizations are often 'dynamically conservative,' because they 'fight to remain the same' (Schön, 1971: 32). In another view, fighting for stability and fighting for change may be seen as alternating processes. From this perspective, the dynamism of everyday life tends to solidify into routines, customs, recurrent patterns, and so forth (Bakken and Hernes, 2006; cf. Berger and Luckmann, 1966, on the reification and institutionalization of intersubjectively constructed social realities). And these seeming stabilities may subsequently become contested and deliberately or unintentionally altered, becoming 'liquid' again in ongoing iterations. Rendering both 'organization' and 'organizing', both noun and verb, credible depictions calls for a research method

that is capable of analyzing both 'what is routinely reproduced' (nouns) and 'what is being altered' (verbs), and the relationships between them. This is what ethnography can offer.

Ethnographers are often drawn to the unexpected, the non-routine, the unusual, the sudden ruptures, and so on, if only because these more manifestly verb-like moments of change tend to attract attention and talk. Ethnography may thereby allow researchers to capture organizational reality 'in flight' (Pettigrew 1992: 11). As they become immersed in the day-to-day, the business-as-usual, the constant reproduction of yesterday, ethnographers are likely to get an inside view of the 'noun-like' qualities of organizational life as well. In working to understand business as usual, they may encounter the more submerged 'flux' of apparently stable routines (Feldman, 2000) and institutions (Lok and de Rond, 2013), thereby catching reality 'in slumber' (or 'kept in slumber' in, for instance, organizational actors' attempt to secure the status quo). Ethnography cultivates a sensibility towards examining both 'back' and 'front regions' (Goffman, 1959), both 'theories-in-use' and 'espoused theories' (Argyris and Schon, 1974), and the interplays and contrasts between the two (see the section below on 'sensework'). As a method of observation and inquiry, it has the potential to bring into view both apparent stability and hidden flux, both managers' grandiose claims of radical change and persistent practices and business-as-usual.

### **Ethnography in fieldwork, sensework, and textwork**

Ethnographic research 'encourages appreciation of social life as constituted by ongoing, fluid processes' (Emerson et al., 1995: 4). Through immersion in, and analysis of, the research setting, ethnographers seek to capture, in-depth and over time, the unfolding of organizational life and its dynamism. As noted above, ethnography entails prolonged and intensive fieldwork, meaning-focused sensework, and 'thick' textwork. We take these up in turn, discussing their potential strengths for the study of processes.

#### *Fieldwork*

Ethnography is commonly defined in the methods literature as a research strategy involving prolonged and intensive engagement with, and in, the everyday humdrum of social life. Also called field research or fieldwork, when used to study organizations it combines methods for observing (with whatever degree of participating), conversing (including formal interviewing), and close reading, literally and figuratively, of documentary sources and other material artefacts, seeking to understand their meanings for situational actors. In organizational settings, the third category includes such things as research question-relevant texts (e.g., annual reports, correspondence, internal memos, webpages) and objects that are amenable to visual methods (e.g., cartoons, jokes, photographs, and other forms of artwork published in those texts or hung on building walls, office doors, and bulletin boards; and built space and its furnishings; see Yanow, 2014, Table 10.1, for other possibilities).

Observing actors, their interactions, and the material artefacts they engage in these helps ethnographers to explore the everyday business that makes up an organization. Using observing, talking, and reading in combination over an extended period of time makes it possible to capture the 'up-in-the-airness' of organizing as it unfolds and, as hanging out at an organizational site proceeds over time, the longer-term changes in the ways things are done. For

example, the second author's ethnography of a newspaper, which focused on 'change-talk', enabled him to see the newspaper's evolving identity as the temporary outcomes of editors' negotiations over the transformation and preservation of existing editorial policies and practices in ongoing everyday discursive struggles over the collective past, present, and future (Ybema, 2014). Informal talks help ethnographers understand the reasons organizational members give for acting the way they do and the meanings that objects, other actors, and acts have for them. Ethnographic studies typically draw on a series of conversational encounters, including follow-ups with the same people, rather than one-off interviews, and this enables the researcher to trace shifts over time, bringing to light patterns that develop over a longer time. The study of material elements, such as documents, which allow ethnographers to follow the traces of history as well as providing snapshots of current states of affairs, can also be helpful in developing a view of changes over time.

Ethnographers bring different kinds of data, generated through the use of different kinds of methods, into conversation with each other, and these interactions among different methods are what give ethnography its specific utility with respect to studying organizational processes. Such intertwining enables attention to the varied character of organizational life, such as noting organizational actors' sensemaking practices across different situations; ...what people do and what they say they do; routine patterns as well as dynamic processes of organizing; frontstage appearances and backstage activities; the minutiae of actors' lifeworlds as well as the wider social and historical contexts in which these lifeworlds unfold (Ybema et al., 2009: 6).

Together with their extended immersion in organizational settings, ethnographers' triangulation across methods helps to detect tensions, alterations, and reformulations that actors might talk about among themselves, explicitly and spontaneously, beyond an engagement with 'official' or public texts only. In these ways, fieldwork helps ethnographers generate accounts that fit a processual understanding of organizations, as these various modes of generating data bring diverse sorts of historical and present-day organizational complexities to the table for comparison and analysis.

#### *Sensework*

In a second understanding of the term, ethnography involves specific 'sensework'. Its distinctive 'sensitivity' is increasingly catching methodologists' attention. They refer, for instance, to ethnographers' inclination to draw on, potentially, all the senses (hearing, seeing, smelling, etc.; Pink, 2009), to see the strange in the familiar (Ybema and Kamsteeg, 2009), to appreciate the spatial and temporal situatedness of organizational practices, or to be attuned to the symbolic, as well as the more hidden and concealed, dimensions of organizational life. Three forms of sensework demonstrate how it directs researchers' attention to matters of process.

First, ethnographers 'work to make sense of organizational actors' sensemaking' (Ybema et al., 2009: 8). This involves adopting 'an orientation toward the social world – actors, (inter)actions, settings – and the material objects in it which focuses on the centrality of meaning and meaning-making to research practices' (Yanow, Ybema and Van Hulst, 2012: 331-332). Analysis engages the specific language, acts, and/or material objects that, in symbolic fashion, carry and transmit the meanings they represent and which actors create and attribute to social realities. Because ethnographers are oriented toward

meaning-making, they zoom in on meaning-making processes and the actual meanings made in specific situations. This enables them to detail the processes of reality construction in very concrete ways, even if these are theorized using more abstract concepts (such as culture, identity, power, discourse, etc.).

Also central to an ethnographer's work is a sensitivity to the 'complexities of the everyday in organizational settings' (Ybema et al., 2009: 1). This second sensitivity is toward grasping what everyday life is like in the setting under study. To achieve this, ethnography commonly rests on an in-dwelling among inhabitants of that place or that practice, sharing the organizational or practice life, typically in a situation-specific role. Such in-dwelling requires ethnographers to *be there*, in the research setting and using all senses, long enough and engaged enough to come to understand the common sense, everyday, unwritten and unspoken, tacitly known 'rules of engagement' that are a second sense to situational 'natives', moving from being more of a stranger to that setting to being more of a 'familiar' in and with it (while rendering it 'strange' again in the writing). Much as 'being there' in everyday life involves engaging with others who inhabit the same environs (family members, co-workers, bus drivers, shopkeepers, etc.), ethnography itself is more than a set of interviews or observations of organizational behavior, entailing instead a degree of 'living with and living like those who are studied' (Van Maanen, 1988: 2). In-dwelling involves becoming socialized to a world that is meaningful to people on the 'inside', getting to know 'the' organization in similar although not identical ways to how organizational members know it. In exploring everyday life, ethnographers delve into the dynamics of the day-to-day. Seeing organizing from the inside can help bring out both routine and non-routine processes of organizing that might escape the attention of a researcher who remains on the outside.

Third, ethnographic sensework also involves an orientation towards the 'back stage' of organizational acts – what organizational actors hope to hide or conceal from public scrutiny – along with an eye for the political and emotional dimensions that underpin everyday organizational life. As noted elsewhere (Ybema et al., 2009: 6-7), ethnographers can access the tacitly known and/or concealed dimensions of meaning-making and expose harsh and hidden organizational realities and entanglements with power. This gives them a particular edge when it comes to studying organizing processes and their front- and back-stages. For instance, ethnographers may study external appearances, formal policies, and other efforts of organizational actors to establish a particular image of or practice in an organization, while also detailing the underlying unsettledness – e.g., emotional struggles or backstage politicking – of such seemingly fixed organizational phenomena. Alternatively, ethnographers may find dynamic front stages and routine backstages. They may find, for instance, management's articulated claims that they are engaging in radical restructuring, embracing the latest management fad or introducing new policies, while at the same time the backstage data reveal hidden processes working to maintain the status quo. As they bring otherwise covert aspects of organizational life to the fore and enable actors to see themselves through another's eyes, ethnographers may at times challenge organizational actors' own senses of routine, taken-for-granted ways of thinking and acting, pointing out the perhaps subtle ways in which these have altered or through which actors have fought to retain them. In sum, by being sensitive to both front and backstage realities, ethnographic work brings out different dimensions of organizational dynamics.

## Textwork

The strength of ethnographic textwork is to ‘see the world in a grain of sand’ (slightly paraphrasing William Blake’s poem; Pachirat, 2014), exploring and exemplifying the general through the local and the particular (cf. Geertz, 2000). The combination of specific detail with broader context offers an alternative to static, apolitical writings, what Pettigrew critiqued as the ‘ahistorical, acontextual and aprocessual’ qualities of most organizational studies (quoted in Bate, 1997: 1155). Three features in particular bear on ethnographies of organizational processes.

Before we discuss the three features, we first say a few words on the textworker’s raw material for describing processes: fieldnotes. Ethnographers in the midst of fieldwork are expected to write lots of detailed notes, a necessary activity for tracing the business-as-usual of everyday organizational life. They might, for instance, document organizational procedures, including how much or how often organizational members deviate from those procedures that at first blush may have seemed strict guidelines. Fieldnotes can also help ethnographers bring into view the improvisations and bricolage that keep organizational procedures running smoothly or prevent them from running into the ground. Later on, these fieldnotes – detailed descriptions of firsthand, field-based observations and experiences – become the building blocks for working up textual reports on the research. The detailed descriptions enable researchers to better ‘identify and follow *processes* in observed events and hence develop and sustain processual interpretations of happenings in the field’ (Emerson et al., 1995: 14, *Italics in the original*; cf. Jarzabkowski et al., 2014).

Having laid the ground for textwork in fieldnotes, how do we get from these notes to ethnographic texts? Fieldnotes are intended to support *thick descriptions* of organizations and organizing. As Geertz (1973) used the term, ‘thick description’ goes beyond detail alone to provide sufficient contextualizing background that readers of an ethnographic account may grasp the meanings embedded in what is being described. The ethnographer (re)constructs the (layers of) meaning of what is going on in the field. The various layers may signal the paths through which organizational realities have gained their present-day shape, the multiple realities that may co-exist at a single point in time, and even both consensus and struggle, stability and change.

Third, one might say that ethnographers shoot their ‘fieldnote film’ on location. While the camera is running, they can begin to see how and to what extent organizational activities and their associated meanings are changing, or not. In this way, small changes in organizational actors’ performances come into view, and the ethnographer can thereby see them ‘constantly reweaving their webs of beliefs and actions to accommodate new experiences’ (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002: 508).

Lastly, ethnographic texts typically situate their descriptive material within the broader social settings and historical and institutional dynamics of which observed life is a part, combining ‘extreme close-ups’ that zoom in on expressions, talk, gestures, and objects with ‘wide-angle’ or ‘long shots’ that zoom out to show panoramic views of the organization, with its history, power relations, surrounding societal discourses, and other layers of meaning (Ybema et al., 2009: 7; cf. Nicolini, 2009). Ethnography may, then, unite ‘Big History’ and ‘small history’ in one text.

We summarize this section’s discussion in Table 1.

<i>Fieldwork</i>	<i>Sensework</i>	<i>Textwork</i>
Extended immersion in the field	Sensibility toward processes of meaning-making	Thick description
Combining methods: conversing/ interviewing, (participant) observing, document locating and reading	Sensibility toward the complexities of the everyday	Placing both author and reader at the scene
Following actors, interactions and objects	Sensibility toward outside appearances as well as tacitly known and concealed processes	Focus on situated action and broader context, mixing close-ups and long shots
Juxtaposing and confronting data from different sources		Interpreting objects, actors and acts as meaningful in a wider context

**Table 1.** Some elements of the three aspects of ethnographizing which contribute to studying organizational processes

## Two examples

Our distinction between extreme close-ups that show detail and wide-angle or long shots that show panoramic views implies at least two different modes of ethnographizing organizational processes: (i) analyzing continuities and discontinuities over a long stretch of time by using ‘long shots’, or (ii) studying short-term, situational close-ups. Some ethnographic researchers stretch their fieldwork over many years of present-time work; others include historical analysis and archival data. Both of these allow researchers to follow slow-paced developments or sudden transformations over long periods of time. Rather than offering a helicopter account that flies quickly from, for instance, founding fathers to present-day heroes, these longitudinal ethnographies offer in-depth accounts of organizational life across time (on combining historical analysis and ethnography, see, e.g., Rowlinson, Hassard and Decker (2014) and Ybema (2014)). Other ethnographic researchers have a shorter term focus, bringing into view, for instance, situational dynamics or organizational bricolage.

We see this distinction between long-term and short-term dynamism, or long shots and close-ups, as partly paralleling the distinction between weak and strong process studies, where the former looks at organizational changes over longer periods of time and the latter sees the continuous improvisations of organizational actors which resemble the calibrating acts of the dancer on the wire (as in the chapter’s second epigraph). In this section, we illustrate these two modes with two examples from empirical research.

### *A long shot: Bankers’ bodies*

Alexandra Michel’s (2011) nine-year ethnography of two American investment banks explores how bankers’ relations with their bodies evolved, the various ways in which the management controls those bodies, and the consequences for the organizations. The author starts from a paradox: U.S. knowledge workers – highly educated and qualified employees who work on intellectual tasks – ‘report autonomy on when and how to work, but their hours are more uniform than a personal-choice model would predict and higher than they are in other times and cultures’ (Michel, 2011: 326). Looking at the literature, she concluded that ‘some controls are not cognitive but bypass the mind – the domain of cognitive control

theories – and target the neglected domain: the body' (2011: 327).

During her study Michel followed four cohorts of bankers who started work in the first and second years of her study. Having worked as an associate at a Wall Street bank, she was treated by her research participants like an in-group member, trusted with sensitive details concerning the ways the bankers changed over time, and invited to join both work and non-work activities. Her research drew on two years—7000 hours—of observation, 600 formal, semi-structured interviews, informal interviews with about 200 informants, and the analysis of bank documents. A substantial part of the interviews concerned bankers' recent experiences and changes in their practices. Michel triangulated her data by source, for instance by counting and comparing references to their bodies which bankers made in yearly interviews. Michel found three phases in the working careers of the bankers, in each of which they related to their bodies differently. In the first – years 1-3 – 'the body' was treated like an object. In the second – year 4-6 – 'the body' became an antagonist, tending to break down. This physical or mental breakdown made the bankers reflect on taken-for-granted actions, noticing the limits of the mind 'and thus relinquish[ing] its control, and let[ting] the body guide the action' (Michel, 2011: 353). Organizational control, however, as the bankers experienced it, 'remained high as the committed bankers fought their bodies' (Michel, 2011: 353). In the third period – year 6 onward – some of the bankers started to treat their bodies like a subject that could guide action. When it occurred, this phase was marked by a feeling of decreased organizational control, but increased banker creativity, ethics, and judgment.

Michel's study gives us an in-depth understanding of an organizational process that is typically hidden from view. This insight was—and could only have been—achieved through an ethnographic study. The long observational time allowed her to see the bigger picture of the bankers' practices and the ways these evolved, leading her to be able to contextualize and thickly describe embodied career work. Tracing changes over time, she was able to note three different periods in the working careers of organizational members. And finally, her ethnographic engagement and in-dwelling helped her to understand not only the bankers' views of work, but also their ways of working, and to track changes in those views over time.

#### *A close-up: Local government storytellers in action*

Our second example draws from the first author's seven month ethnography of a Dutch local government, including deliberations concerning the site planning for a new town center (van Hulst, 2008a; 2012). Along with analysis of research-relevant documents and interviews with some 50 organizational actors, the fieldwork entailed semi-participant observation in weekly meetings of the town's governing board, whose members were the mayor and aldermen, and in frequent meetings of civil servants and of aldermen, citizens, and other members of civil society. Starting from the observation that actors involved in such processes 'tell stories to talk about what is going on and what should be done with public spaces' (Van Hulst, 2012: 308), stories were reconstructed from conversations, interviews, documents and observation notes.

The plotline of the main story that actors started out with might be condensed as follows: *Our town has a shopping centre, but it lacks a heart. For 25 years we have been planning for such a town center. Some favour Location 1, others Location 2. Up until now, however, none of the plans has materialized.* Due to the failure of prior planning activities, a political gulf had grown between

those who preferred one or the other of these two different locations. To move beyond this deadlock, members of the newly elected governing board argued that on their watch, the planning decision would be 'now or never'. The board, with the help of the municipality's bureaucracy and hired consultants, would prepare a proposal for the municipal council which would include a comparison of various possible locations, along with board members' own preference. As a first step, research had to be done to determine the suitability of each of them, something the alderman in charge of planning for the center referred to as determining their 'DNA'. In an effort to reframe the debate, the board proposed choosing among five locations rather than just two. On the basis of the research, each location would receive a score, and this would help the board decide on their preferred location and assist them in preparing their proposal for the municipal council. In the meantime, that alderman organized public meetings at all five locations, where he told a story about the planning process and the need for a center that the municipality could afford to build.

At the conclusion of the research, one of the two original locations received the best score, the other coming in only in third place. In that moment, the board, whose members had just agreed to support the top-scoring location, wondered whether their endorsement would satisfy those who still favoured the other one. It turned out that they had not considered the other three locations seriously. The alderman in charge and his staff improvised a solution, thinking this might help win over the anticipated opposition: a connection would be built linking the two locations, which were not far apart.

In the days and weeks that followed, a new (sub)plot was woven at the town hall; but other actors did not sit still. They, too, were thinking about the stories they could tell on the basis of recent developments. Some continued to hold out their favorite location and the story that went with it. Others adopted the board's new story. To the surprise of the board, however, one of the political parties they had expected would support their new story came up with yet another narrative. This one started from the idea that a new center had to be built for the coming 100 years. As the town would grow in a westward direction, this made a third location—one of the new ones—much more feasible than the research had suggested. The turmoil that ensued was the unintended consequence of the board's having created competition among five locations. On the final, 'now or never' decision night, the members had to threaten to resign in order to win the vote for the location they had endorsed.

This ethnography describes an organizing process whose history had unfolded over decades, but it zooms in on a relatively short period of time: the final months of decision-making. During this period, in reaction to new developments in the planning process and its related political processes, old stories were reconstructed and retold. None of the central actors involved knew for sure what the others were up to and how that would affect the outcome of the deliberations. At the same time as knowledge of what was going on was highly distributed among parties to the debates, various actors were still struggling to make sense of the ongoing, collective sense making. Even as time was running out, contending actors were working on their new stories, meeting for a final show-down on the night the decision had to be taken.

Talking to the various parties enabled the ethnographer to get a good sense of the meanings the prospective town center and center planning held for them. But while from the outset the process appeared to be a straightforward fight between two stories, things turned out to be much more complicated—for both decision-makers and ethnographer. The study of front *and* back stages

revealed the involved process's twists and turns. Observation, conversations, and interviewing while the planning process was in play made it possible to see how new storylines developed and gained momentum and to understand how storytelling related to other activities of organizational and other actors.

The research deconstructed the storytelling that took place in the deliberative process, showing how stories are constructed in real time, building on the planning process's long history and reacting to its recent developments. It also contextualized the storytelling as part of broader planning and political organizing in which the question at stake concerned what it should mean, in a normative sense, to have a new town center. The ethnographer's presence in the field also allowed him to observe and, indeed, experience the struggles, surprises and improvisations that characterized the organizational storytelling and the contingencies in the ways organizational events unfold. And, indeed, it is not easy to bring out such complexities in a short case description. In the end, because much of what is going on is taking place almost simultaneously and/or hidden from sight, a single picture – a somewhat stable entity – of the process can only emerge after the grand decision is made and the (ethnographer's) report is written.

### Reflections

We have sought to make the case that ethnography is useful for studying organizational processes. But ethnography, let us not forget, is itself dynamic, 'a fundamentally creative, explorative and interpretive process' (Humphreys et al., 2003: 21). Moreover, as we noted in the section on sensework, the person of the ethnographer is a crucial element of ethnographing. Therefore, ethnographers are asked to reflect not just on the research process, but also on the ways in which their own backgrounds, prior experiences, and other aspects of their positionalities were part of that process—specifically, of what they were able to access and not access—thereby enabling the knowledge claims they articulate in the ethnographic texts they produce. That is why this research practice might be called *ethnographing* (Tota, 2004, de Jong, Kamsteeg and Ybema, 2012). It is something we do, something that develops along the way, something that is in motion. Ideally and necessarily, ethnographers go with the flow, rather than wedding themselves to pre-ordained research plans; researcher learning is anticipated to take place across the lifespan of the project, rather than being 'front-loaded' as in experimental research design (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012). To use more formal methods language, ethnographic inquiry processes work iteratively or abductively (Agar 2010) and in reflexive cycles (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012), offering room for and even welcoming doubt (Locke et al., 2008) and surprises (Ybema and Kamsteeg, 2009), moving flexibly with events as they unfold (van Hulst, 2008b). Even though ethnographers' methods are fairly standardized (observing, participating, talking, reading, as noted above), what the study or its results will eventually look like cannot be stipulated in advance.

Although ethnography may bring 'process' more clearly into view, this is not what organizational ethnographers always do. In addition to exploring what ethnography can bring to process organizational studies, therefore, we also want to consider what a process orientation might contribute to organizational ethnography. Ethnography might make its inherently processual approach more explicit, defining its work as a flow of ethnographing and, for example, developing an understanding of fieldwork as researchers' acts of 'following', something which could also be written into research accounts in ethnographic

texts. To capture organizational realities 'on the move', 'in flight' or 'in slumber', ethnographers follow actors, interactions, and/or artefacts as these 'travel' across social and symbolic boundaries (Yanow, Ybema and van Hulst, 2012). Instead of offering a static account of organizational settings and structures, or of a team, organization or community in isolation or in two-way interactions, the 'following fieldworker' travels along with, or 'trails', actors, interactions and/or artefacts, 'mapping' over time and across locales, levels and domains (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012), 'zooming in' and 'zooming out' (Nicolini, 2009) on everyday practices.

Such a strategy involves, for instance, following actors and their acts by 'shadowing' persons (Wolcott, 1973; Czarniawska, 2007) who travel across spatial, social or temporal boundaries, thereby providing insight into key processes. Research may also involve following interactions, rather than actors, over extended periods of time, focusing on the 'trading zones' (Kellogg et al., 2006) where actors—different stakeholders, multidisciplinary teams or discussion forums on the internet—meet. Alternatively, in lieu of following actors or acts, ethnographers might follow artefacts and other aspects of the material world travelling through time and/or space, such as 'the career of information' (Harper 1998: 68), tracking the various interpretations and uses made of the information. These three – actors, acts, and artefacts – might also be followed simultaneously, as Hoholm and Araujo (2011) suggest for the ethnographic study of innovations. The two extended examples in the previous section could have been presented as 'following' studies: Michel (2011) followed actors and their bodies, Van Hulst (2012) followed actors located at different points in the organizational network of a local government.

Seeing ethnographic research as pursuing a strategy of following actors, acts and/or artefacts may be further extended, for instance, to following the manufacturing of a product from base material to consumer commodity; following an organization's workflow from dawn to dusk; following a chain of events set off by an incident or an accident (e.g., Christenson et al. 2009); or following the development of discussions among a multiplicity of members of an organization over a particular issue (e.g., Ybema, 2003). Following is also appropriate for the assemblages that increasingly characterize global organizing, whether of products or services.

In sum, ethnography fits well with process thinking given that ethnographers typically do one or both of two things. First, they stick around for a long time, which enables them to witness movements over time and/or space, thereby making visible processes that unfold slowly. The bodies of hardworking employees, for instance, might not start failing in one month, but could be seen to do so over a period of several years (Michel, 2011). Second, ethnographers get close to the action on the ground, typically engaging the complexities, intricacies, and messes of everyday organizational life. In drawing close to subjects and situations and providing detailed accounts of the micro-dynamics of day-to-day organizing, ethnography offers a more complex alternative to the simplification of input-output models of process.

Writing this chapter called our attention to the extent to which organizational ethnography might gain from adopting a more explicitly processual approach. Ethnography is inherently, but often implicitly, process-oriented; and we would like to see more ethnographies explicitly adopt a process view, one that sees social realities as the product of the here and now (short-term dynamics) and of the then and there (long-term dynamics). Studies of organizational practices, institutions or identities, for example, might move from

treating those phenomena as stable entities towards seeing them as entailing recurrent bricolage, break-downs, and improvisations (e.g., Brown, 2006; Feldman, 2000; Lok and de Rond, 2013; Nicolini 2009; Schatzki, 2006; Tsoukas and Yanow, 2009; Ybema et al., 2009) which can best be studied in real time, one of ethnography's strengths as a method of inquiry. In bringing out the processual aspects of ethnography, this chapter might contribute to 'internal' methodological developments, in addition to its promise for studying organizational processes in various fields of study.

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